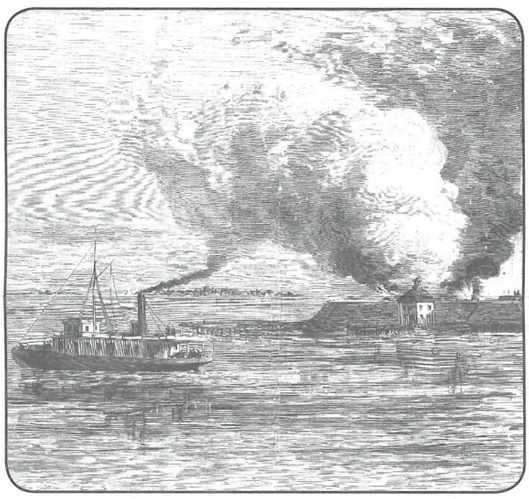
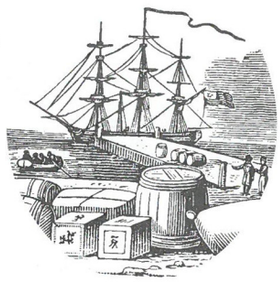
War on the Outer Banks - For Kids



Food, clothes, and many other things were carried across the oceans in ships. The Atlantic coast has always been a big part of trade. This area became even more important in times of war. Ships and trains were used to bring guns and food to soldiers. Each side wanted to control the trade route. That way, their soldiers could get supplies but their enemies could not.

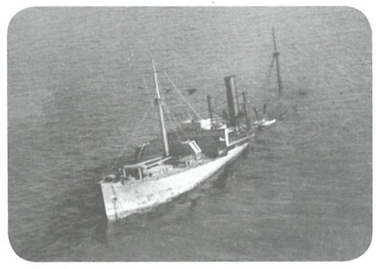
Shipping During Wartime

The coast of North Carolina has always been a dangerous place for ships. Ships might run into sand bars or shallow water and get stuck. Or, they might get caught in a storm and be blown into the shore or sink.



Ships were in even more danger in wartime. Ships taking food and guns to soldiers might be attacked. Enemy ships or submarines would try to sink the supply ships. Most of the time, they would shoot at the supply ships. Sometimes, they would try to force to the ship to run aground.

During the Civil War, the states in the North and South fought each other. The Union, from the North, tried to keep ships from sailing to the south with supplies. During World War Two, ships going to Europe sailed up the Atlantic coast. Many of these ships were owned by United States or its friends, the Allies. German submarines sank a lot of the Allies' ships.



Merchant Ship Sinking

Fighting for the Banks: The Civil War

United States President Abraham Lincoln

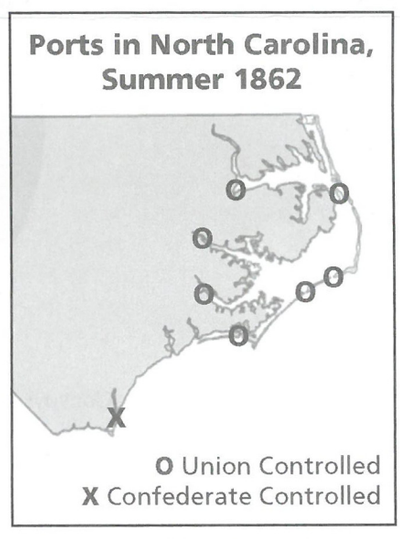
Confederate President Jefferson Davis

The Civil War began when a group of soldiers from South Carolina captured Fort Sumter. Both sides knew that the North Carolina coast was important. Whoever had control of the coast could control supply routes in the state. The supply routes helped get food, clothing, medicine, and guns to soldiers.

Sketch of Portsmouth Hospital, Dr. Marvin P. Rozea

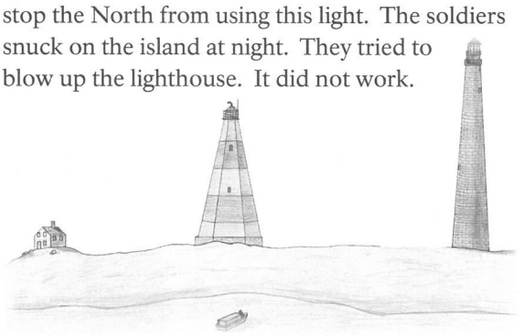
The hospital in Portsmouth Village was used as a camp for the South. The North won the battle at Hatteras Inlet in August. Six months later, they captured Roanoke Island too. When the troops in Portsmouth heard about this, they decided to leave their camp.

By the summer of 1862, most of the state's coast was controlled by the Union. These were very important wins for the North. It meant they were able to stop ships and supplies from getting to other parts of North Carolina.



Cape Lookout Lighthouse Raid

The North relit the Cape Lookout Lighthouse in March of 1863. They did this to help Union ships avoid the shallow water on the state's coast. A small group of soldiers from the South tried to stop the North from using this light. The soldiers snuck on the island at night. They tried to blow up the lighthouse. It did not work.



Artist's sketch of the raid on the lighthouse

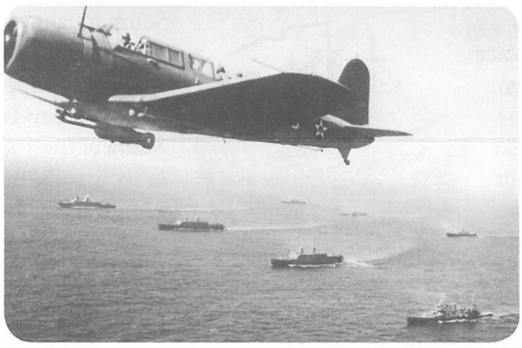
But, they did burn the oil used to keep the light working. They also broke some of the iron stairs inside the lighthouse. Iron was used to make cannons, cannon balls, rifles (a type of gun), and other items. There was no iron to fix the lighthouse stairs. The Union used wood instead. The wood stairs were replaced with iron stairs after the war. These temporary stairs left marks on the inside walls of the tower. You can still see these marks today.

Repairs to the steps may have looked like this

German U-boats: World War Two

World War Two began when Germany invaded Poland. France and Great Britain went to war with Germany. The United States held back.

Ships taking supplies to England still travelled up the coast of the United States. German submarines, called U-boats, tried to stop these ships. They sunk a lot of ships. Pieces of sunken ships and supplies they carried washed up on shore. The British found that groups of ships were needed to escort supply ships to safe harbors. These groups of escort ships were called convoys. A lot of ships were saved by these convoys.



Convoys might include battleships and airplanes

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States entered the war. But, they did not send enough ships to the Atlantic coast to use convoys. Also, many towns did not require people to darken their lights at night. This meant that supply ships could be clearly seen by the light of coastal towns. That made them very easy targets for U-boats.

The *Dixie Arrow* received 3 torpedo hits off the shore of North Core Banks, March 1942

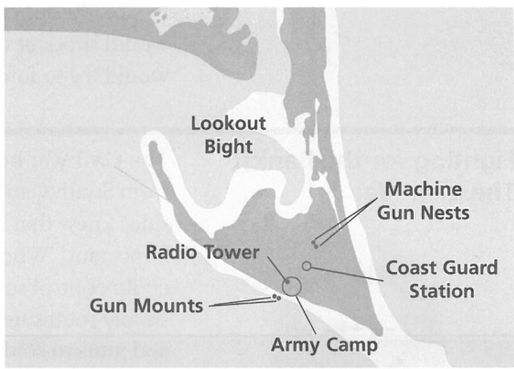
The United States lost a lot of ships from January to June of 1942. Plates, food, wood, and other items from sunken ships washed on shore. Water became fire as oil leaked out of ships and burned on top of the sea. People on the Outer Banks saw U-boats when they took their boats out to fish. Most of the country had no idea this was happening.

Protecting the Cape Lookout Bight

By the summer of 1942, things were changing. Towns and ships started doing "blackouts." People used thick curtains on their windows. This kept the light inside their house or on the ship from being seen outside. That made the town or ship look as black as the night, making it harder to see ships at night.

Using blackout curtains

Convoys were being used to protect supply ships. Land defenses also got better. Coast Guard stations, like the one at Cape Lookout, were used to search for U-boats and to protect ships.



World War Two defenses at Cape Lookout

The station at Cape Lookout had two machine gun nests in the village and two 6-inch guns on the beach. These guns were used to protect the Cape Lookout Bight. The Bight is a natural harbor. It is deep enough for large merchant ships to enter. But, since there is only one way out, U-boats did not try to follow the ships.

Fewer ships were sunk after the United States started using convoys and other defenses. By August, the Germans sent the U-boats away from the Atlantic coast of the United States. The war moved to other parts of the world.